

Daily Gazette

Libraries' role in open government to be explored

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CAPITAL REGION — Public libraries have always helped patrons find information about local government programs and services.

But as more government programs and services have moved online, they've been providing more of this type of assistance than ever before.

Last week, the Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany was awarded a one-year, \$90,000 grant to explore public libraries' role in open government.

The idea is to help libraries better understand how to help governments engage with citizens and to increase government transparency, accountability and accessibility, said Brian Burke, who is coordinating the center's Open Government and Libraries project.

Burke said the Obama administration's open government directive has renewed interest in finding new ways to make government more transparent and accessible. Among other things, the administration has created websites, such as <http://data.gov>, which makes government datasets available to the public, and <http://FOIA.gov>, which tracks how government agencies respond to requests for information.

Governments are "using technology to become more transparent," Burke said. "We see a new opportunity for libraries to get involved in that."

"One missing element in our efforts to create more open governments is full understanding of the role of public libraries in the larger open government ecosystem," said Theresa Pardo, the center's director.

The year-long effort will culminate in a national forum next spring that will bring together academics, government officials and nonprofit organizations to discuss libraries and open government.

“We like to identify the key capabilities libraries need to be successful,” Burke said. “We want to try to figure out how libraries can do a better job at networking with governments, with citizens and with civic organizations.”

He said digital and electronic government services have created more work for libraries, because librarians are often the ones who teach people how to access and use these online tools.

“When the government puts stuff online, citizens are less likely to interact with the government,” Burke said, “but libraries might have to increase their services.”

The grant was awarded by the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program, which is supported by the Washington-based Institute of Museum and Library Services. The program funds projects aimed at recruiting and educating the next generation of librarians, faculty and library leaders, and assists in the professional development of librarians and library staff.

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